

We Could Blow the Whole Thing

What if suddenly there was no AA? If, in some nightmare future, AA groups forgot all about the Twelve Traditions.

Nothing in my life had prepared me for the six months through which I had just lived. Not my education, not my drinking, not my recovery in AA. I'd been assigned to the field as a representative for my company, to oversee the operation of an experimental system for mining copper in South America. It meant spending exactly 180 days cut off from civilization, living and working with a hard-drinking bunch of men from everywhere, assembled for the project. Fresh from the office, a lovely home and family, and an active life in AA locally, I was suddenly thrust into a dark and treacherous existence in a jungle camp, thousands of miles away.

Right from the beginning, it was every man for himself. There were bosses and sub-bosses, some of whom knew only the authority born of physical violence. Cliques were everywhere, and because of the extreme isolation, men's nerves wore thin. Recreation ended in drunken brawls almost every night. In the morning, sick and hung over, everyone got back to work.

I kept asking myself, "What's a nice AA like you doing in a place like this?"

At the end of my stint, there was only one thought in my mind: How fast can I get to a meeting? As it happened, there was a day's layover on my trip home, and I knew there'd be a meeting somewhere nearby.

I remember the feeling of excitement as, in the rented car, I pulled out of the hotel parking lot. My International AA Directory was safe at my side, and my anticipation grew as I found the street, and then the address of the meeting. What a welcome sight that church was, as I walked briskly to the side door. I could almost smell the coffee, and I reached for the handle.

The door was locked. In fact, there wasn't a sign of life anywhere. I checked the directory, and it showed clearly I was in the right place. A glance at my watch told me the meeting scheduled should begin in ten minutes. I scratched my head--where was everyone?--and I walked back to the car.

I stood on the street for a few minutes more, and when no one appeared, I shrugged and got in, and turned on the light. Well, I thought, there should be another meeting somewhere nearby. Looking down the list, I found a Step group across town. Within a few minutes, I pulled up to a large church, its lights beckoning everywhere. My enthusiasm was short-lived, however. A thorough search of the parish house revealed a number of empty rooms, one vestry meeting, and no AA to be found.

The eerie feeling that had begun to grow in me now turned to anger. What the heck was going on here? I left the church and headed my car back out of town, toward my hotel. As I drove, I ranted and raved. Some way to treat a visitor! I was sure nothing like this could ever happen back home--we knew how to keep AA together a lot better! I was halfway through the blistering letter I'd fire off to the AA General Service Office upon my return home, as I pulled into the hotel lot and went to my room. Still grouching, I went to bed.

The next morning, as I stepped out of the shower, I hadn't shaken off the indignant rage that haunted me. On an impulse, I looked at my watch. It was about half past ten in New York, and I knew GSO would be open. I picked up the phone, not trusting my anger to last till I returned home, and placed the call.

The operator and I listened to the recording: "The number you have reached is not in service at this time." My shock was indescribable. A verifying operator obtained the same message, and I hung up. Now, for the first time, I was genuinely afraid. There was obviously something really wrong, and I wasn't sure I knew what to do. Funny, all I could think of was that old saw "Don't drink, and go to meetings." What a laugh! Later, I turned the car in at the airport and boarded a plane for home, arriving late that evening.

Naturally, the first thing I did when I was settled in with my family was to get on the phone to some of my AA friends. There was no one home anywhere I called, and I felt the oddest sensation. I was suddenly in the Twilight Zone. Everything I knew about the AA program, all the tools I'd been using for the past few years, were suddenly gone!

The next morning I was out early, and I drove to the roadside coffeehouse that had become the unofficial AA club. It had always provided an all-day meeting, of sorts, and surely there someone could tell me what was going on.

There was only one car in the parking lot. I walked inside, and I saw only George T., who owned the place, sitting at the end of the counter. He greeted me warmly. "Well, hello, buddy. Where've you been? It's been an age since I've seen you!"

I shook his hand eagerly but decided to skip the small talk. "George, what's going on?" I began at the beginning and told him of all the strange things that had happened to me.

George never really changed expression, and when I finished my tale, he just looked at me. Then, staring into his coffee, he said, "Y'know, buddy, I'll bet you're the last guy on earth to hear the news, and I'm sure sorry I gotta be the one to tell you. It's all over, buddy--AA is just a figment of your alcoholic imagination now. It's all gone."

I stared at him. "What are you saying?"

"Just that, buddy. There is no more AA--not here, not anywhere!"

"But--but how can that be?" I stammered.

"Well now, that's a long story," George said, like a man retelling something for the umpteenth time. "It was a case of benign neglect, I guess you could say. Sort a slow, like a cancer, it was. You know, there was always lots a groups--thousands of them--and folks to carry the message all over the place. And that GSO office in New York to send out stuff. Who'd ever think a thing like that could just fall apart? But y'know, buddy, that's just what it did. It just went to seed and died,"

I couldn't speak. I just stared openmouthed at George.

After a minute, he went on. "I guess it was in the spring, just after you left on that trip of yours, that we got a letter from New York appealing to all AAs for help. They said it felt like they were under attack from all sides, and the structure was beginning to fall apart. That rash of anonymity breaks, y'know, that started last fall--and that national telethon didn't help, with all those AAs getting their faces on TV. Seems like all our friends at the churches just started closing out our meetings faster than we could get new places. Didn't want any part of the 'new AA,' they said!

"Then, in April, there was that last General Service Conference. Boy, it must've been something! See, there was this bloc of delegates that got together, nobody seemed to know how, and just took over! They said it was about time the real group conscience had its day. Threw out the whole board of trustees and did over the whole general service structure. Yep—they really did it, vote by vote. What a bunch of super salesmen! Of course, they were only the tip of the iceberg. It turned out they had a regular organized bunch of drunks all over the country.

"Well, the rest was predictable. Before you could blink, they sent out a long 'restructure bulletin' from this new World AA Office, and they laid down a whole set of rules and new procedures, and began to badger the groups for pretty heavy 'donations.' In a few weeks, almost a third of all the groups in the whole Fellowship had already folded. They died like flies! The rest were all confused and couldn't cope with the load, plus all the bickering that broke out. Finally, I guess everybody just gave up. There've been some halfhearted attempts around town to keep it going, on an independent basis--y'know, in homes, here at the club--but believe me, it just ain't the same, if you know what I mean. Nobody feels like a part of anything anymore."

I was stunned. When I finally found my voice, I said, "George, what happened to the Traditions? That's why we had the Twelve Traditions!"

George blinked. "The Twelve what?" he asked. . . .

Of course, it's all a fantasy. I'm not even a mining engineer. And one thing I've learned in AA is not to be an alarmist. Still, around the groups I attend, it does seem that we AAs sometimes get a little funny about the Traditions. That's what prompted me to wonder: What would happen if we all decided to let somebody else safeguard these twelve foundation stones?

If you woke up one morning, and found there was simply no more AA, where would that leave you?

Yeah, that's the feeling I got, too.

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